

The New York Review of Books ¹

FEBRUARY 10, 2011

What Is a Good Life?

by Ronald Dworkin

Morality and Happiness

Plato and Aristotle treated morality as a genre of interpretation. They tried to show the true character of each of the main moral and political virtues (such as honor, civic responsibility, and justice), first by relating each to the others, and then to the broad ethical ideals their translators summarize as personal “happiness.” Here I use the terms “ethical” and “moral” in what might seem a special way. Moral standards prescribe how we ought to treat others; ethical standards, how we ought to live ourselves. The happiness that Plato and Aristotle evoked was to be achieved by living ethically; and this meant living according to independent moral principles.

We can—many people do—use either “ethical” or “moral” or both in a broader sense that erases this distinction, so that morality includes what I call ethics, and vice versa. But we would then have to recognize the distinction I draw in some other form in order to ask whether our ethical desire to lead good lives for ourselves provides a justifying moral reason for our concern with what we owe to others. Any of these different forms of expression would allow us to pursue the interesting idea that moral principles should be interpreted so that being moral makes us happy in the sense Plato and Aristotle meant.

In my book *Justice for Hedgehogs*—from which this essay is adapted—I try to pursue that interpretive project. We aim to find some ethical standard—some conception of what it is to live well—that will guide us in our interpretation of moral concepts. But there is an apparent obstacle. This strategy seems to suppose that we should understand our moral responsibilities in whatever way is best for us, but that goal seems contrary to the spirit of morality, because morality should not depend on any benefit that being moral might bring. We might try to meet this objection through a familiar philosophical distinction: we might distinguish between the content of moral principles, which must be categorical, and the justification of those principles, which might consistently appeal to the long-term interests of people bound by those principles.

We might argue, for example, that it is in everyone’s long-term interests to accept a principle that forbids lying even in circumstances when lying would be in the liar’s immediate interests. Everyone benefits when people accept a self-denial of that kind rather than each person lying when that is in his immediate interest. However, this maneuver seems unsatisfactory, because we do not believe that our reasons for being moral depend on even our long-term interests. We are, most of us, drawn to the more austere view that the justification and definition of moral principle should both be independent of our interests, even in the long term. Virtue should be its own reward; we need assume no other benefit in doing our duty.

But that austere view would set a severe limit to how far we could press an interpretive account of morality: it would permit the first stage I distinguished in Plato’s and Aristotle’s arguments, but not the second. We could seek integration of the ethical and moral within our distinctly moral convictions. We could list the concrete moral duties, responsibilities, and virtues we recognize and

then try to bring these convictions into interpretive order—into a mutually reinforcing network of ideas defining our moral responsibilities. Perhaps we could find very general moral principles, like the utilitarian principle, that justify and are in turn justified by these concrete requirements and ideals. Or we could proceed in the other direction: setting out very general moral principles that we find appealing, and then seeing whether we can match these with the concrete convictions—and actions—we find we can approve. But we could not set the entire interpretive construction into any larger web of value; we could not justify or test our moral convictions by asking how well these serve other, different purposes or ambitions that people including ourselves might or should have.

That would be disappointing, because we need to find authenticity as well as integrity in our morality, and authenticity requires that we break out of distinctly moral considerations to ask what form of moral integrity fits best with the ethical decision about how we want to conceive our personality and our life. The austere view blocks that question. Of course it is unlikely that we will ever achieve a full integration of our moral, political, and ethical values that feels authentic and right. That is why living responsibly is a continuing project and never a completed task. But the wider the network of ideas we can explore, the further we can push that project.

The austere view that virtue should be its own reward is disappointing in another way. Philosophers ask why people should be moral. If we accept the austere view, then we can only answer: because morality requires this. That is not an obviously illegitimate answer. The web of justification is always finally, at its limits, circular, and it is not viciously circular to say that morality provides its own only justification, that we must be moral simply because that is what morality demands. But it is nevertheless sad to be forced to say this. Philosophers have pressed the question “why be moral?” because it seems odd to think that morality, which is often burdensome, has the force it does in our lives just because it is there, like an arduous and unpleasant mountain we must constantly climb but that we might hope wasn’t there or would somehow crumble. We want to think that morality connects with human purposes and ambitions in some less negative way, that it is not all constraint, with no positive value.

I therefore propose a different understanding of the irresistible thought that morality is categorical. We cannot justify a moral principle just by showing that following that principle would promote someone’s or everyone’s desires in either the short or the long term. The fact of desire—even enlightened desire, even a universal desire supposedly embedded in human nature—cannot justify a moral duty. So understood, our sense that morality need not serve our interests is only another application of Hume’s principle that no amount of empirical discovery about the state of the world can establish conclusions about moral obligation. My understanding of a proposal for combining ethics and morality does not rule out tying them together in the way Plato and Aristotle did, and in the way our own project proposes, because that project takes ethics to be, not a matter of psychological fact about what people happen to or even inevitably want or take to be in their own interest, but itself a matter of ideal.

We need, then, a statement of what we should take our personal goals to be that fits with and justifies our sense of what obligations, duties, and responsibilities we have to others. We look for a conception of living well that can guide our interpretation of moral concepts. But we want, as part of the same project, a conception of morality that can guide our interpretation of living well.

True, people confronted with other people’s suffering do not normally ask whether helping those people will create a more ideal life for themselves. They may be moved by the suffering itself or by a sense of duty. Philosophers debate whether this makes a difference. Should people help a child because the child needs help or because it is their duty to help? In fact both motives

might well be in play along with hosts of others that a sophisticated psychological analysis might reveal, and it might be difficult or impossible to say which dominates on any particular occasion.

Nothing important, I believe, turns on the answer: doing what you take to be your duty because it is your duty is hardly disreputable. Nor is it culpably self-regarding to worry about the impact of behaving badly on the character of one's life; it is not narcissistic to think, as people often say, "I couldn't live with myself if I did that." In any case, however, these questions of psychology and character are not relevant to the question that I am posing here. Our question is the different one of whether, when we try to fix, criticize, and ground our own moral responsibilities, we can sensibly assume that our ideas about what morality requires and about the best human ambitions for ourselves should reinforce each other.

Hobbes and Hume can each be read as claiming not just a psychological but an ethical basis for familiar moral principles. Hobbes's putative ethics—that self-interest and therefore survival are the greatest good—is unsatisfactory. At least for most of us, just achieving survival through a morality of self-interest is not a sufficient condition of living well. Hume's sensibilities, translated into an ethics, are much more agreeable, but experience teaches us that even people who are sensitive to the needs of others cannot resolve moral, or ethical, issues—as Hume's theory might suggest—simply by asking themselves what they are naturally inclined to feel or do. Nor does it help much to expand Hume's ethics into a general utilitarian principle. The idea that each of us should treat his own interests as no more important than those of anyone else has seemed an attractive basis for morality to many philosophers. But as I shall shortly argue, it can hardly serve as a strategy for living well oneself.

Religion can provide a justifying ethics for people who are religious in the right way; we have ample illustration of this in the familiar moralizing interpretations of sacred texts. Such people understand living well to mean respecting or pleasing a god, and they can interpret their moral responsibilities by asking which view of those responsibilities would best respect or most please that god. But that structure of thought could be helpful, as a guide to integrating ethics and morality, only for people who treat a sacred text as an explicit and detailed moral rule book. People who think only that their god has commanded love for and charity to others, as I believe many religious people do, cannot find, just in that command, any specific answers to what morality requires. In any case, I shall not rely on the idea of any divine book of detailed moral instruction here.

The Good Life and Living Well

If we reject Hobbesian and Humean views of ethics and are not tempted by religious ones, yet still propose to unite morality and ethics, we must find some other account of what living well means. As I said, it cannot mean simply having whatever one in fact wants: having a good life is a matter of our interests when they are viewed critically—the interests we should have. It is therefore a matter of judgment and controversy to determine what a good life is. But is it plausible to suppose that being moral is the best way to make one's own life a good one? It is wildly implausible if we hold to popular conceptions of what morality requires and what makes a life good. Morality may require someone to pass up a job in cigarette advertising that would rescue him from poverty. In most people's view he would lead a better life if he took the job and prospered.

Of course an interpretive account would not be limited by such conventional understandings. We might be able to construct a conception of a good life such that an immoral or base act would

always, or almost always, make the agent's life finally a worse life to lead. But I suspect that any such attempt would fail. Any attractive conception of our moral responsibilities would sometimes demand great sacrifices—it might require us to risk, or perhaps even to sacrifice, our lives. It is hard to believe that someone who has suffered such terrible misfortunes has had a better life than he would have had if he had acted immorally and then prospered in every way, creatively, emotionally, and materially, in a long and peaceful life.

We can, however, pursue a somewhat different, and I believe more promising, idea. This requires a distinction within ethics that is familiar in morals: a distinction between duty and consequence, between the right and the good. We should distinguish between living well and having a good life. These two different achievements are connected and distinguished in this way: **living well means striving to create a good life, but only subject to certain constraints essential to human dignity.** These two concepts, of living well and of having a good life, are interpretive concepts. Our ethical responsibility includes trying to find appropriate conceptions of both of them.

Each of these fundamental ethical ideals needs the other. We cannot explain the importance of a good life except by noticing how creating a good life contributes to living well. We are self-conscious animals who have drives, instincts, tastes, and preferences. There is no mystery why we should want to satisfy those drives and serve those tastes. But it can seem mysterious why we should want a life that is good in a more critical sense: a life we can take pride in having lived when the drives are slaked or even if they are not. **We can explain this ambition only when we recognize that we have a responsibility to live well and believe that living well means creating a life that is not simply pleasurable but good in that critical way.**

You might ask: responsibility to whom? It is misleading to answer: responsibility to ourselves. People to whom responsibilities are owed can normally release those who are responsible, but we cannot release ourselves from our responsibility to live well. We must instead acknowledge an idea that I believe we almost all accept in the way we live but that is rarely explicitly formulated or acknowledged. We are charged to live well by the bare fact of our existence as self-conscious creatures with lives to lead. We are charged in the way we are charged by the value of anything entrusted to our care. It is important that we live well; not important just to us or to anyone else, but just important.

We have a responsibility to live well, and the importance of living well accounts for the value of having a critically good life. These are no doubt controversial ethical judgments. I also make controversial ethical judgments in any view I take about which lives are good or well-lived. In my own view, someone who leads a boring, conventional life without close friendships or challenges or achievements, marking time to his grave, has not had a good life, even if he thinks he has and even if he has thoroughly enjoyed the life he has had. If you agree, we cannot explain why he should regret this simply by calling attention to pleasures missed: there may have been no pleasures missed, and in any case there is nothing to miss now. We must suppose that he has failed at something: failed in his responsibilities for living.

What kind of value can living well have? The analogy between art and life has often been drawn and as often ridiculed. We should live our lives, the Romantics said, as a work of art.¹ We distrust

¹Oscar Wilde, for example: "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence." And: "All that I desire to point out is the general principle that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life." John Keats: "A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory." Friedrich Nietzsche: "Art represents the highest task and the truly

the analogy now because it sounds too Wildean, as if the qualities we value in a painting—fine sensibility or a complex formal organization or a subtle interpretation of art’s own history—were the values we should seek in life: the values of the aesthete. These may be poor values to seek in the way we live. But to condemn the analogy for that reason misses its point, which lies in the relation between the value of what is created and the value of the acts of creating it.

We value great art most fundamentally not because the art as product enhances our lives but because it embodies a performance, a rising to artistic challenge. We value human lives well lived not for the completed narrative, as if fiction would do as well, but because they too embody a performance: a rising to the challenge of having a life to lead. The final value of our lives is adverbial, not adjectival—a matter of how we actually lived, not of a label applied to the final result. It is the value of the performance, not anything that is left when the performance is subtracted. It is the value of a brilliant dance or dive when the memories have faded and the ripples died away.

We need another distinction. Something’s “product value” is the value it has just as an object, independently of the process through which it was created or of any other feature of its history. A painting may have product value, and this may be subjective or objective. Its formal arrangements may be beautiful, which gives it objective value, and it may give pleasure to viewers and be prized by collectors, which properties give it subjective value. A perfect mechanical replica of that painting has the same beauty. Whether it has the same subjective value depends largely on whether it is known to be a replica: it has as great subjective value as the original for those who think that it is the original. The original has a kind of objective value that the replica cannot have, however: it has the value of having been manufactured through a creative act that has performance value. It was created by an artist intending to create art. The object—the work of art—is wonderful because it is the upshot of a wonderful performance; it would not be as wonderful if it were a mechanical replica or if it had been created by some freakish accident.

It was once popular to laugh at abstract art by supposing that it could have been painted by a chimpanzee, and people once speculated whether one of billions of apes typing randomly might produce *King Lear*. If a chimpanzee by accident painted *Blue Poles* or typed the words of *King Lear* in the right order, these products would no doubt have very great subjective value. Many people would be desperate to own or anxious to see them. But they would have no value as performance at all. Performance value may exist independently of any object with which that performance value has been fused. There is no product value left when a great painting has been destroyed, but the fact of its creation remains and retains its full performance value. Uccello’s achievements are no less valuable because his paintings were gravely damaged in the Florence flood; Leonardo’s *Last Supper* might have perished, but the wonder of its creation would not have been diminished. A musical performance or a ballet may have enormous objective value, but if it has not been recorded or filmed, its product value immediately diminishes. Some performances—improvisational theater and unrecorded jazz concerts—find value in their ephemeral singularity: they will never be repeated.

We may count a life’s positive impact—the way the world itself is better because that life was lived—as its product value. Aristotle thought that a good life is one spent in contemplation, exercising reason, and acquiring knowledge; Plato that the good life is a harmonious life achieved through order and balance. Neither of these ancient ideas requires that a wonderful life have any impact at all. Most people’s opinions, so far as these are self-conscious and articulate, ignore

metaphysical activity of this life.”

impact in the same way. Many of them think that a life devoted to the love of a god or gods is the finest life to lead, and a great many including many who do not share that opinion think the same of a life lived in inherited traditions and steeped in the satisfactions of conviviality, friendship, and family. All these lives have, for most people who want them, subjective value: they bring satisfaction. But so far as we think them objectively good—so far as it would make sense to want to find satisfaction in such lives—it is the performance rather than the product value of living that way that counts.

Philosophers used to speculate about what they called the meaning of life. (That is now the job of mystics and comedians.) It is difficult to find enough product value in most people's lives to suppose that they have meaning through their impact. Yes, but if it were not for some lives, penicillin would not have been discovered so soon and King Lear would never have been written. Still, if we measure a life's value by its consequence, all but a few lives would have no value, and the great value of some other lives—of a carpenter who pounded nails into a playhouse on the Thames—would be only accidental. On any plausible view of what is truly wonderful in almost any human life, impact hardly comes into the story at all.

If we want to make sense of a life having meaning, we must take up the Romantics' analogy. We find it natural to say that an artist gives meaning to his raw materials and that a pianist gives fresh meaning to what he plays. We can think of living well as giving meaning—ethical meaning, if we want a name—to a life. That is the only kind of meaning in life that can stand up to the fact and fear of death. Does all that strike you as silly? Just sentimental? When you do something smaller well—play a tune or a part or a hand, throw a curve or a compliment, make a chair or a sonnet or love—your satisfaction is complete in itself. Those are achievements within life. Why can't a life also be an achievement complete in itself, with its own value in the art in living it displays?

One qualification. I said that living well includes striving for a good life, but that is not necessarily a matter of minimizing the chances of a bad one. In fact many traits of character we value are not best calculated to produce what we independently judge to be the best available life. We value spontaneity, style, authenticity, and daring: setting oneself difficult or even impossible projects. We might be tempted to collapse the two ideas by saying that developing and exercising these traits and virtues are part of what makes a life good.

But that seems too reductive. If we know that someone now in poverty courted that poverty by choosing an ambitious but risky career, we may well think that he was right to run that risk. He may have done a better job of living by striving for an unlikely but magnificent success. An artist who could be comfortably admired and prosperous—Seurat, if a name helps—strikes out in an entirely new direction that will isolate and impoverish him, requires immersion in his work to the cost of his marriage and friendships, and may well not succeed even artistically. If it does succeed, moreover, the success is unlikely to be recognized, as in Seurat's case, until after his death. We may want to say: if he pulls it off, he will have had a better life, even taking account of the terrible costs, than if he had not tried, because even an unrecognized great achievement makes a life a good one.

But suppose it doesn't come off; what he produces, though novel, is of less merit than the more conventional work he would otherwise have painted. We might think, if we value daring very highly as a virtue, that even in retrospect he made the right choice. It didn't work out, and his life was worse than if he had never tried. But he was right, all things ethically considered, to try. This is, I agree, an *outré* example: starving geniuses make good philosophical copy, but they

are not thick on the ground. We can replicate the example in a hundred more commonplace ways, however—entrepreneurs pursuing risky but dramatic inventions, for instance, or skiers pressing the envelope of danger. But whether we are ourselves drawn to think that living well sometimes means choosing what is likely to be a worse life, we must recognize the possibility that it does. Living well is not the same as maximizing the chance of producing the best possible life. The complexity of ethics matches the complexity of morality.

Notes

¹<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/feb/10/what-good-life/>